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FROM "SWEETBACK"

MELVIN VAN PEEBLES

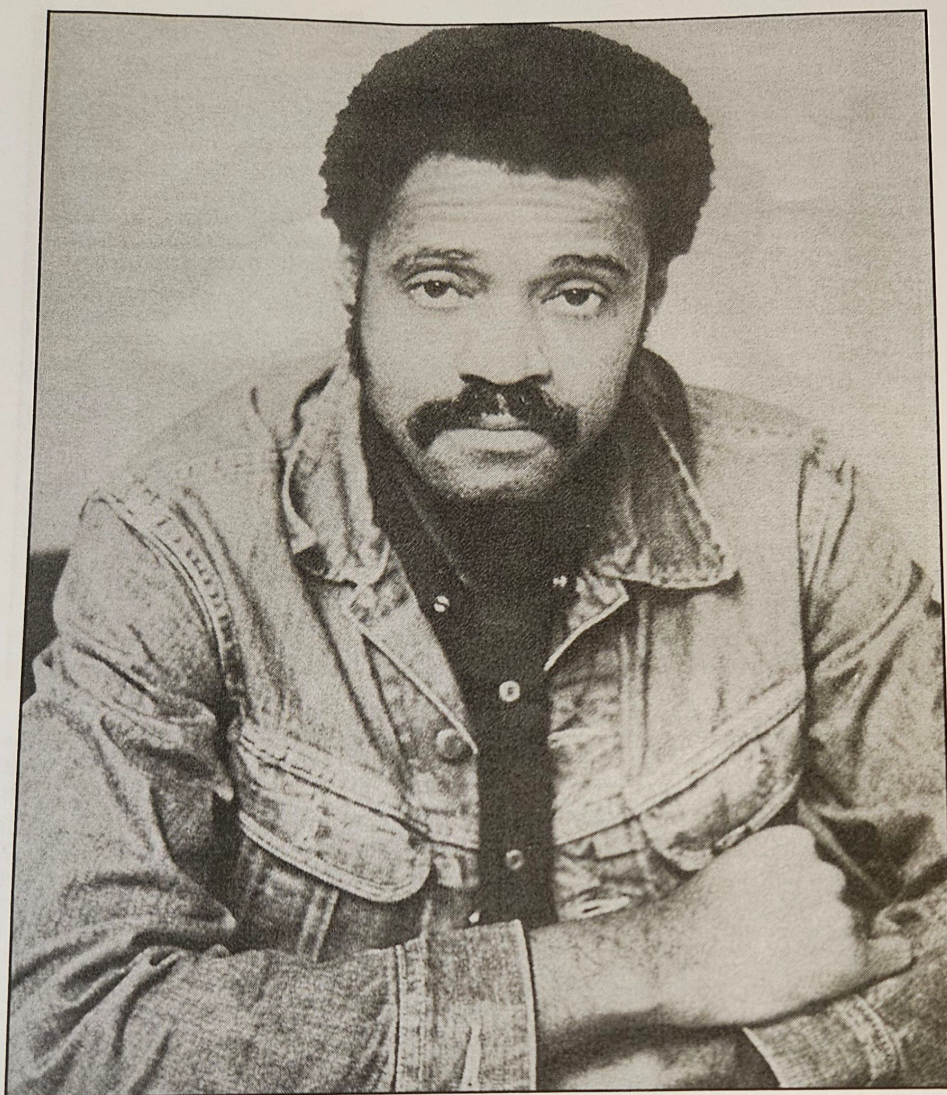
TO "THE TRUE AMERICAN"

Of the many speeches that I had to give in my college English class, this was the one that I really enjoyed. Basically, the assignment involved talking about somebody, in the news or in my life, whom I felt personified a particular quality that I respected. The moment I heard the assignment it took little time for me to visualize the person and the quality that I was going to talk about in my upcoming speech.

The person was Melvin Van Peebles, and the quality was the "will to succeed." "The Will To Succeed" was a concept that had fascinated me for a long time. I often pondered the reasons why some people rose to heights, able to actualize themselves, while others seemed to opt for mediocrity. For as Oscar Brown, Jr. has stated, "It takes just about as much energy or more to be mediocre as it does to be excellent."

The speech, I was told in the class critique was filled with enthusiasm, as my obvious affinity to my subject matter helped make my delivery convincing and powerful. After the class was over, many of my classmates posed questions to me concerning Melvin Van Peebles' career as well as asking about this dubious concept called the "will to succeed." Dealing with the concept at that time gave me an opportunity to share some positive ideas with others about the potential that I feel is inherent in each of us. Explaining, I said that each of us is unique and that it is our personal responsibility to strive towards discovering our uniqueness and to seek to provide ourselves with the proper soil and nourishment necessary for our creative growth. It was necessary to point out that the desire for that exploration is very important, but it is also important that we develop the tenacity to hang in there when things get difficult and the way becomes blurred. As novelist John Oliver Killens puts it, "We have to learn to be Long Distance Runners." (See Impressions Magazine, Vol. 1 #3)

Some years have passed since that speech, yet the essential kernel of my belief has remained intact, and my respect for the integrity of Melvin Van Peebles' accomplishments and energy has increased as he continues to move forward on any number of levels practically simultaneously.



In this first exclusive interview since the release of his hilarious new novel, *The True American*, published by Doubleday, Melvin talks with us about his ideas concerning art, including his approach to art, providing insights into the witty and pragmatic world in which he lives. He first received national attention as the French delegate to the San Francisco International Film Festival with the presentation of his film, *The Story of a Three Day Pass*. After returning to Hollywood, Melvin directed the highly successful movie *Watermelon Man*, which starred Godfrey Cambridge. Being independent by nature (and choice) Melvin scored, wrote, produced, directed, starred in and distributed (whewww!) the historic *SWEET SWEETBACK'S BAADASSSSSS SONG*, which is one of the largest-grossing films in the history of the motion picture industry. Moving to the theatre, his play *Ain't Supposed To Die A Natural Death*, on Broadway, was viewed by critics and

audiences alike as a landmark achievement and received a Tony nomination for best musical. A gifted singer-composer, Melvin's most recent album, *What the... You Mean I Can't Sing?* (on the Atlantic Label) was a popular success. His other recordings, on the A&M label, include *Brer Soul* and *Ain't Supposed To Die A Natural Death*. In addition to his new novel *The True American*, Melvin has penned such books as *The Big Heart* and *A Bear For The F.B.I.* He made Broadway history as the first producer to have two musicals, *Ain't Supposed To Die A Natural Death* and *Don't Play Us Cheap*, running concurrently. Recently, Melvin co-hosted *Black Journal* on WNET.

The following interview with Melvin gave us (Cal Wilson and myself) a first-hand opportunity to inquire into his motivations and hopefully answer some of the many questions that have been floating around concerning the mythology of Melvin Van Peebles.

Cal Wilson: It's been said that one of the problems that filmmakers have is that they fail to use the visual element to it's full capacity. How much do you consider yourself a photographer in terms of your film technique?

Melvin Van Peebles: Hmm. It's all quite an integral part of the way I work.

As you know, I basically moved into cinema because I'm a writer. Well... that's even a hedge... Let me put it this way, for years I used to laugh when I looked back on my early childhood. I was raised to be a minister. This is when I was about ten or fourteen years old, that is what my mother wanted me to be, a minister. I laughed at what a funny idea that was, until I realized, maybe something happened unconsciously, but I am preaching. I really don't concern myself with the visual per se, or the audio per se or the... I have something that I want to say, and I never thought about it. I guess the visual is very important, but I don't think of it as a separate entity from all of the rest of what I'm trying to say. Do you follow me? I writing a new novel now, and I've written the story as a play already, which I haven't yet put on. When I take it from a play to a novel, there's a whole change. There's a change because a novel is one step further along in its final form when it gets to the reader, whereas a play is for the eyes outside of the dialogue, the eyes of the director and the actors who then take it to its final form. When I do a movie, I think of the visual probably as the final form that I would be taking it to if I were doing a novel. As to what style is, it's the way you do something, the way you think. You can probably consciously acquire a style, or you can just do it as it comes to you. Correcting, of course, for intelligibility, for the speed with which your mind works, the speed of the typewriter and the personalities of a number of lecturers, readers who you've never met, or viewers who you've never seen. I went into movies, as I went into all the other things. Let me begin the odyssey of how I went into these things. I used to be a painter, so I guess the visual is very important. I lived in Mexico. I had scholarships as a painter. I didn't know many black people, who were into painting, who affected very strongly their immediate lives. I wanted to affect our immediate lives. So from there I went into books, because I felt I could reach a broader audience, and books are beginning now to affect our lives. At the time they weren't affecting our lives that much on a one to one basis, and I looked around and said, where was the large effect being made on our lives, or where are our images of ourselves being

formed, and one place, I felt, was in the theatre. That would be about the third place down on the ring; after that would come television and movies, and if television and movies was where it was happening, where I could find a platform. . . this is where I go back to that minister that I thought that I had quit as a child. That's where I could talk to the folks, so that's where I went. When I went there, I didn't go with the thought of style. I didn't know the difference between 16mm and 35mm. I knew how stuff looked; I didn't realize the a priori supposition that I was making of a subjective judgement. I was just doin' it. Like someone may think that he's just playing the horn, but he's heard Bird, he's hip to Cecil's [Taylor] chords, just by the fact of him being out there of this time. And if he's not hip to Cecil's chords, some guy who we heard who stole it from Cecil, he's hip to it. . . So I don't know! I have to caution you that in an interview with myself, I won't pontificate, cause I don't know that much about it. I went to movies 'cause I was sittin' in a movie one night and said, "Shit, I could do better than that." I just got tired of seeing what I was seeing. . . When I said that, I was not talking about the lighting, I was not talking about the action, the pace, the montage. I didn't even know that those things even existed. They were just there! I knew I got tired of seeing niggas humming spirituals everytime they were getting lynched. And that was my point of view, where I attacked from, and where I went to, and that was the construction and the idea which I had that launched me into the arts, onto movies. Of course, everybody said that I was crazy. My cinematic education consisted of a guy I know showing me how to

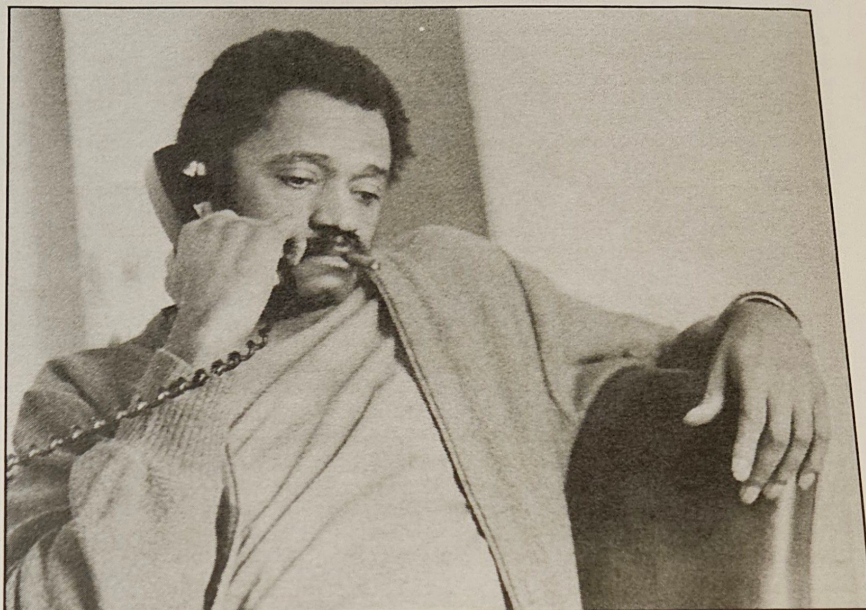


Photo by Bob Bryan

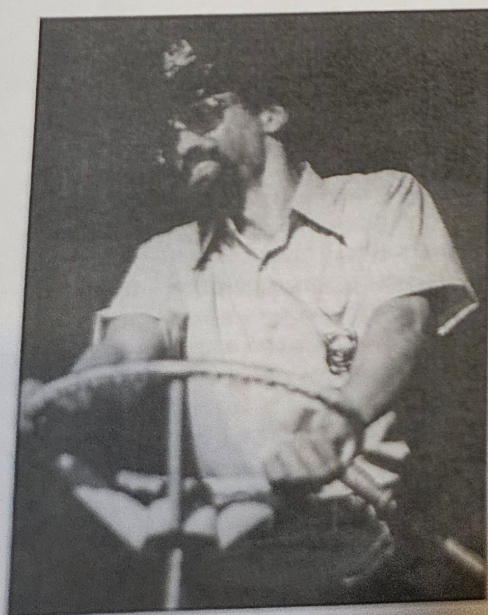
splice two pieces of film together. That's all anybody ever taught me. I didn't know that that was called montage yet, and the first time I went into a studio, a cat says "What did you do?", and I said, well, I did this, and he said, "You don't do all those things." I didn't know that. Hey, I didn't know, 'cause I had nobody to show me. Not knowing what I didn't know, I just went right ahead and did it. You dig where I'm coming from? And people have talked about my style, or the lack of it, or how defined it is. I don't know! But the fact is that each one of us has a creative fingerprint, and that creative fingerprint by lesser people, then gets diluted. See, everyone is trying to put life into a manageable rule of thumb, because it is such an unruly, hurly-burly, bubbling, whirling thing. And if we can construct rules. . . and there are possibilities of finding lines of comprehension in works, but, myself, I don't bother with the lines of the work. I do the work and let somebody else find the lines. Now a lot of times people. . . there are two kinds of critics. There are the brilliant perceptive critics, those who agree with me, (laughter) and then there's them ignorant mothafucka's who don't (laugh) and I don't even bother about them. You know where I'm coming from, and that's just where I'm at.

Bob Bryan: Understanding that the ideas that you are projecting, do you consciously think about the style in which you construct a piece of work?

Melvin: Well, I do think about style,

but I don't know if it's called style. It's like when you see a chick and you want to hit on her, "now how an I goin' to get her." You are talking about style. Now, you may not call it style. . . I remember a buddy and I were at a thing, and there was this girl, and we wanted to hit on her. O.K.? So we flipped a coin, and I won. So I was a rough cat, so I said, "Hey baby, you gonna give me some?" (laughter) She said (affected), "no". He was standing in the corner, his shot. "Hi, how long you been here, you want some coffee?" Boom, he copped. That was it! Now, if he would have done my thing, I would have copped. She might have said, "Hey, I'm down for the git-down," then he would have been out. But from a more analytical person, in a distant way, looking at, "Well, you choose a style that. . ." "Hey, I'm just trying to get over. . . when I tell a story, I'm just trying to tell it. For example, when I was doin' *Sweetback*, I wanted it to look all arm pits and elbows, man. I didn't want that smooth facade, and I worked. . . many times, I would take the film through a couple of generations to give it that rrrrrr, you know, that glare that. . . like you use dissonance on a piano, 'cause you want to hear a thing and you don't know. . . I can't read or write music. I'd be just doin' a thing and a trained musician would say "Oh! that's G to a minus. . ." That's very interesting; I don't know what all that was, but I do know what made my left ear twitch good and my right shoulder

feel well when I hit a certain thing, and



Jack & Williams in *Don't Suppose to Die* (Lynwood Burdick)

VAN PEEBLES CONT.

that's what I would do.

Bob: That's interesting because I think that a lot of people in this society don't do what they want to do because they are told that you have to be this or you have to be that; or that you have to specialize; or they get hung up on the terms instead of the feeling.

Melvin: Right. Well, now, I cannot claim intelligence for the things I did. I mean, I tried the other thing, but every-time I would try the other way, I would fart or I'd slip and I finally said, "Hey, man, you got to go with your style, you just got to go with the way you are." I mean, if I would try to enunciate correctly to comebody, I wouldendup crack-ing up, and so forth. Not having good sense, I had at least the street know-ledge not to try and be something that I wasn't. I mean, I tried. No, since I've tried unsuccessfully to be something I wasn't, one day I said, "Well, fuck it!" You dig it! And from then on all bless-ings flew.

Bob: They've called you everything from genius, to whatever. How do you respond to being called these things?

Melvin: You mean, there are two people who call me these things—the ones who spell my name right and the ones who don't. "Early to bed, early to rise, work like hell and advertise." I don't mind. Look, ain't nobody called me nothin' when I was in the post office. Huh, Cat didn't even know my name; I

was just a number. He's already on my turf, if he bothers to call my name, to call me a whole bad thing.

Bob: When you reflexively look back at the ideas that you've put out in your books, in the theatre, and in movies, do you think that the things which really have changed people, or transformed them on some level happen because of the conscious consciousness or on a sub-conscious level?

Melvin: I think they can happen on a number of levels. Guys ask me how I felt about film or about theatre, and what I'm trying to do in the book. I went out to Hollywood when a nigga couldn't get arrested out there, huh. They got blacks in them unions now, blacks are doin' it all over, blacks are doin' it. Well, I like to think in a large part that I'm respon-sible for that. Even though sometimes I disagree with what they do. At least we're learning the craft, which allows, then, for people to interpolate and I think this was happening. I think it began to happen once they acquired the craft and had the opportunity. A lot of times young people come up to me and say, "Brother man, I want to do like you did," this and that and the other. I say, well, slow your roll. I spent ten years gettin' it together. I worked for the man, and so forth and so on, and scratched my head, and I shuffled this, that and the other, gettin' that thang. So we've managed to short-circuit that for you to some extent. Don't be intimidated and feel that I sprang full-blown with all of this knowledge. I learned it the hard

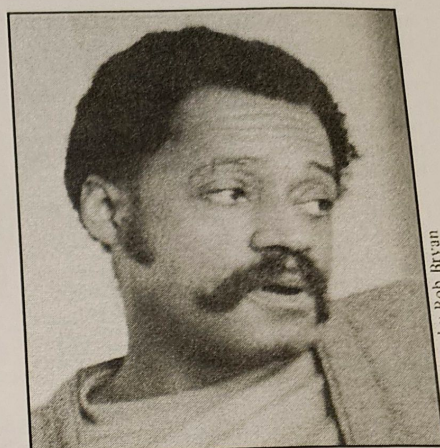


Photo by Bob Bryan

way, and a way that was harder than it had to be, or should be. But still, acquire the knowledge and don't be intimidated by it.

Bob: Then you're not intimidated by the mythology of Melvin Van Peebles?

Melvin: No! It don't bother me. You see, I decided you can be black-mailed by failure or white-mailed, whatever you want to call it. You can be intimi-dated by failure but you can also be intimidated by success, but me, I got laid before, so I ain't got nowhere to go.

Cal: You said that you were tired of seeing the kinds of things that black people were doing in the movies. . .

Melvin: No, I didn't. I said some of those things I might not like.

Cal: Yeah, some of those things you might not like. So, in essence, did you think that these acts in the films re-in-forced behavior of people? What was it exactly that you didn't like about these things?

Melvin: Let's take, for example, the use of the establishment of force to steal control. . . I think that revolutionary films or the revolutionary aspects that I tried to show in *Sweetback*, for exam-ple, have been pre-empted and made counter-revolutionary, because now, any time a guy in the films kicks some-body else's ass, and we begin to yell for the hero, he pulls out a badge, or he pulls out a license. In other words, he's still, if you think about it, he's still work-ing under daddy, huh; still working under daddy. Man, I saw a film—this chick came out and, bam, shot 95 million cats. Boom. I said Dy-no-mite. And police say, "Hey", then run up to her. She says, "Get away from me, mothafucka" and pulls out a badge. "Well, see, actually I'm an FBI agent. I work for the such and such," which reinforces in the mind of the audience, "Yes, he is still father", which is, as far as I'm concerned, hey, but that's a. . .



Rhetta Hughes and Esther Rolle in *Don't Play Us 15 Cheap*.

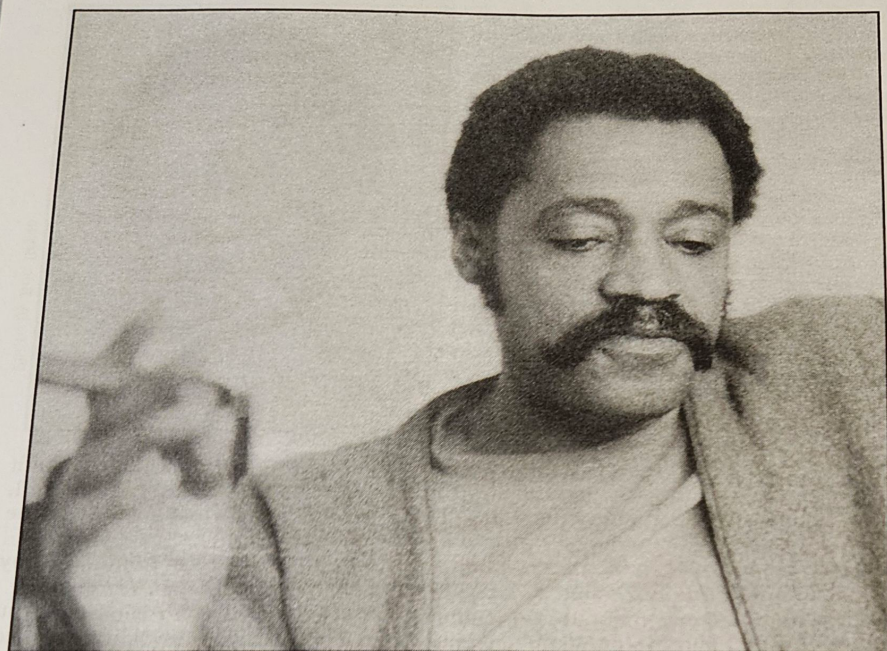


Photo by Bob Bryan

don't really deal with that.

Bob: There are a lot of things, in your past, particularly, that you don't like to talk about, so I've heard.

Melvin: That's correct.

Bob: Why is that... without talking about the past?

Melvin: Because, when you haven't made it, or when you're just another niggah, as soon as you do, they try and take episodes or reasons from you to differentiate you from the other. "Oh, you were born in Chicago, that's why; all brilliant people come from Chicago." Well, there are black people down in Missouri who don't need to be intimidated about where somebody came from, you understand me? "Oh, you went to such and such a school, that's why it is you are so forth." They use that as a subtle differentiation. You see, once you've made it, the next move, if they can't keep you down, is to separate you, and this is part of this whole... like... sometimes people get very insulted, because I won't sign autographs. 'Cause it's not about that. It's not about me being... and I've seen a whole lot of cats turn left, man. You get up there, you were dynamite from the gitty-up, but then, as things went on, you kept signing those autographs and you kept saying (affects voice), "Well, yes, what do you think about such and such?" You start believing that shit. Now, I'm just as weak as the next person: the only way that I know, with the weaknesses that I have, is to avoid it. Just stay out of it, then I don't have to

get used to it. If I were king, my first decree, if I were king of the United States would be to take all of the fans out of the toilet, 'cause there are too many big-timers who don't think that their shit stinks, and let them once more realize that their shit stinks...

Bob: If you had the platform to re-narrate your past, coming from your mouth, what would you say is important to mention?

Melvin: Coming from my mouth? It only takes two words. "I'm Black". If you count the apostrophe, that makes three words. That's all! Because all the rest... I mean, look I... I could leave the swankiest party, this, that and so forth, I can't get no cab any faster than everybody else.

Cal: For large periods of time, you've been outside of the country. Do you feel that a person, in order to really understand the American mentality, has to have spent time outside the country?

Melvin: It depends on the person. I didn't change... when I looked around to get the game together, to run the game I wanted to run, I had to woodshed. I had to have a place where the people weren't hip to what I was getting ready to put down. Now, don't forget that when I went down to Hollywood in '57, and said, hey, I'd like to get into film and so forth, I wrote a book that was published here ten years later, but I had published it elsewhere. People said, "Well, naw", they weren't ready for that. That's cool, that's cool 'cause once you understand that, then you have to go where you can go, and ho

you can go, and succeed by any means necessary. And succeeding by any means necessary at this time meant running to the left to hit to the right. Now, when the whole thing started was when I came back as a French delegate to the San Francisco Film Festival. Now, that put a hurtin' on the establishment, that was saying, "Well, one of these days we're going to let you in, when we think that those black fingers can manipulate our equipment... it's very complicated and your minds are still too close to the jungle, blah, blah", and all that other shit, you dig it. You've got to run, how where you can run. It's like asking a cat, well, why did you throw a pass instead of running? You look at which way your defense is lined up, and that's the way you make your move.

Cal: Now, I've heard you say that you plan to put out your ideas in as many forms of media as possible. When you came out with your record album, that was another way of dealing with people. Do you plan to go into radio or television, and what do you think would be the dynamic of your becoming involved in those fields?

Melvin: Well, it's a time limitation of whatever I go into. You have to juggle your priorities. However, after *Sweetback*, I was able to borrow money and bogard money beforehand, because I promised everybody two for one. That is, I promised them that they could help me and feel liberal and that if I failed, then their racist theories would be vindicated. When I didn't fit their magnificence, or whatever that word is, to do another job, I would be SOL, but by having diversified... like any other corporation, that's why people diversify, because if nothing doesn't go here, you can be going somewhere else. You dig where I'm coming from? Just like, you be talking to a chick, and you see that one ain't gettin' over, so you switch. I'm just trying to get the man's foot out of my ass. My ass, if you have any social consciousness or understanding, you have to realize that in order to get him out of my ass, I have to get him out of your ass, too. So we've all got to work together. We've got to all work together, or I can put on the blinders of the middle class and say, well, as long as I got my little thing, then I'm safe. And I can have a limousine waiting for me, so that I can forget how hard and how much trouble it is to pick up a cab or walk. I take the subway now, I be sitting on the subway and people be looking at me, and they shake their heads. "You know, that cat looks like Melvin Van Peebles." "That couldn't be him..."

Bob: He's on the subway?

Melvin: "He's on the subway." I took the subway before! Why not? Dig where

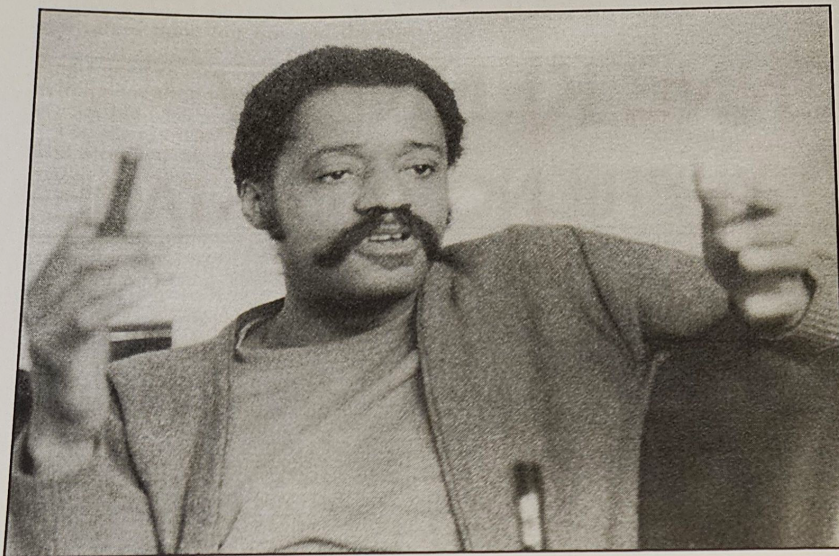


Photo by Bob Bryan

I'm coming from. When you take the subway, or when you wait for the bus . . . that's where that song that I wrote called "Just Don't Make No Sense" . . . if I didn't wait for the bus, I'd forget about that. Maybe. I think that experience is too indelible in ones memory to forget. It creates a whole schizophrenia, a whole paranoia, trying to forget, but if you can pull all that together, then you're in business.

Bob: Do you deliberately go out after new experiences?

Melvin: No, man! I don't have to go after no new experiences. I step outside and a new experience grabs me. "Hey." Always some trouble. The other night I was at a girlfriends. She was asleep and I couldn't get in, and I'm trying to. I ain't got the key, and I'm trying to get to a telephone. One telephone don't work, another telephone, and the hawk is out there, kickin' ass and takin' names (laugh). That's a new experience! So just by living, if you don't insulate yourself, you've got all the experience you need. So then I go into a bar, and I put a dime in, and the phone don't work, and I'm beginning to get the number and a bouncer comes over, "Hey, man, you stayin' or you goin'?" "Well, wait, man, I'm just. . ." "I think that you tryin' to avoid the cover charge and listen to the music." I said, "Naw, man, look, how much is the cover?" "Naw, I don't want the money, I just don't like to be. . ." Now he's gonna go through a whole thing. . . "Look, man, I'll pay the cover, just let me put the dime in here, in the phone, would ya please mistuh, please, huh?" You don't have to. . . just livin' there's

enough going' on out there, right? Step out on the corner and there's an old rag lady, who, "Yes, who gon' shoot their neighbor?" You know what I mean?

Bob: But you know that you don't have to go through certain kinds of experiences because you're financially solvent; that you could ride around in a limousine, if you were into that. In a way, you must be *in there but out there*.

Melvin: Yeah but I enjoy it. Hey, man I enjoy talkin' to people, goin' here, goin' there. I'm pretty much of a hermit. I'm very seldom ever seen, 'cause I got a lot of work to do. The writing aspect, which is my power base, is a very long, drawn-out process. People often ask me, and very nicely so, "When you gonna do something else, brotha man?" Well, it's different if I am just acting, because you go from one thing to another, or directing is a little longer time, 'cause it takes a longer span for a movie and so forth. But your writing is an even longer span, and to even keep any kind of pace, I have to work seven days a week, man. I work seven days a week.

Bob: Do you live and work in this office?

Melvin: Naw. . . well more or less I do. I don't have a place. I haven't had a place for years. I'm a bachelor; well, I'm a divorcee.

Cal: In the notes to the paperback version of *Sweetback*, you said that you did not want to be didactic. In other words, you wanted to be entertaining, understanding that you know that people have already been brainwashed. So, expecting that. In your song, *There*, would you agree that that's an example

of what you were getting at? Rather than coming right out and saying that the brother beats up on his wife *because* of the nine to five job, you just express that.

Melvin: That is right, exactly, one hundred percent right. And if you can put it to a beat where people can nod their head and dig it and get the message. . . whereas, I could have said "I would like to explain to you so forth and so on" (affects snoring). I wanted to make a political film to explain some of the realities of Black America. Now, the vocal people who were down and raising hell, the elitists who decided the way the revolution was going to be run. . . When you start getting any kind of togetherness on another level, that they haven't decided, everybody gets pissed. You know what I mean, a guy says, well, hook shots won't work. A guy says, "Hey, man, I just made four points for us with two good hooks." Instead of him saying, "Yea for the team," he says, "Ahh shit. You're a revisionist!" You dig it?

Bob: Your ideas seem to have been ahead of your time. Do you think that most people are ahead of their time, but hold back for the sake of conformity?

Melvin: Well, I don't know if I am ahead of my time; I like to think of myself as timeless. If we would just stop and think about the hypes the man has laid on us. . . Remember the song, the last song in *Ain't Supposed to Die A Natural Death*. *Put A Curse On You*. Every time you get hip to the old one, the man lays a new hype on you. You see, my decision was that first I would try to make it possible for us to have technicians, and then I would not dictate to those technicians the political move that they would have to take. I'm just gonna try to get the food to the folks' mouths. "Stay loose." We say this all the time, we use these words, and then

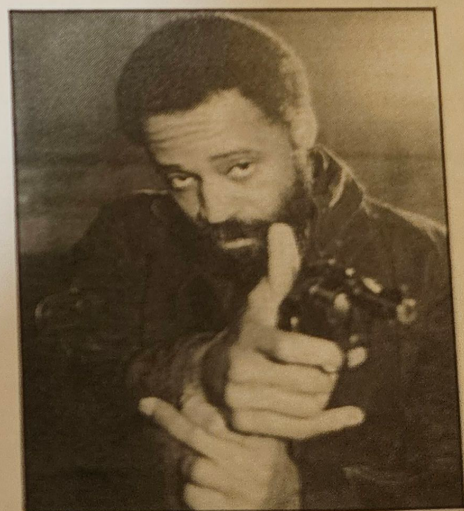


Photo by Martha Swope

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COVER STORY *Cont'd from page 33*
we get as rigid and as tight-assed as anything.

Bob: Yet you see so many people who are rigid.

Melvin: Let me explain this to you now. I ain't responsible for "so many people." I have enough trouble making it to the toilet, myself. You dig what I mean? I don't know. An interesting fact, for example, man, is that I've won awards, and this and that, but you know that no one has ever done one of my songs. Nobody has ever covered a tune that I've written. And I got people sayin' how dynamite they are. Ain't nobody ever sang a tune.

Bob: What do you think are the reasons for that?

Melvin: Well, probably, one is content, the other is the form that they were couched in originally. The third is, I don't have a lot of time to be in the bars sayin', "Hey, look, man, you gotta do such and such. . .do my tune."

Cal: What were you talking about when you said that your album was going to give Gladys Knight competition?

Melvin: I didn't say that.

Cal: Oh. You never said that.

Melvin: No. I don't know who. . .

Cal: . . .Somebody wrote it somewhere.

Melvin: Whoaa, now hold it, don't be no fool! 'Cause somebody wrote something somewhere don't mean that you ask me what did I mean, or did I say it. I didn't.

Bob: Your new novel, the fiction piece, *The True American*.

Melvin: That's my bicentennial offering.

Bob: To what?

Melvin: What do you mean, to what? To the bicentennial!

Bob: The celebration of the two hundred years that America did what?

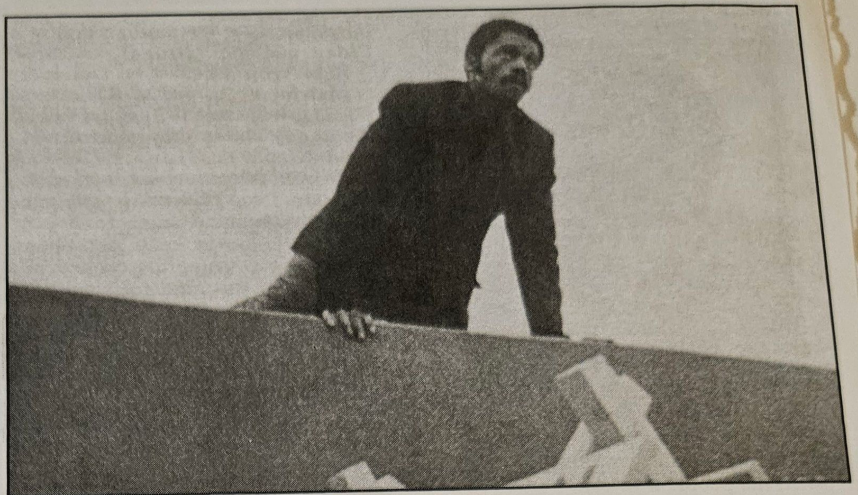
Melvin: Uh-huh, right. That's why you buy the book (laughter).

Bob: Who is the "True American", what is the "True American". What are you saying in *The True American*?

Melvin: No, no, no, no, no, uh ahh. That's why you buy the book (laughter). Now, what I will say, and what I'm sure you meant, was (laughter), what is *The True American* about. It's about these two cats who meet up in Hell. And, uhh, who break out and. . .come back to the earth, and what happens to them. One of them, and one of us, and that's what it's about. In many ways, I think I've managed to offend just about everybody, and it's a very funny book, man, very funny. Did you read *Sweetback*?

Bob: Yeah!

Melvin: It's sort of like that, you go with it. If you don't go with it. . .its like jazz, if you ain't in the tempo you could



Melvin getting over in *Sweetback*.

EXCERPT FROM "THE TRUE AMERICAN"

Abe scooted down in the back seat. "O.K., let's go," the Judge said. They drove directly to the Harriman mansion and into the garage.

"Wal, I don't guess nobody saw us, judge," the Sheriff said.

"We ain't through yet," the Judge said. "We gotta get the Prince some clothes."

"What kinda clothes do a Prince wear?" the Sheriff asked.

"I'm sorry, Prince, but we do not have robes...would a suit be all right?" the Judge asked Abe.

The Prince nodded Yes.

"Fine, thank you, Prince...you are very understanding." The Judge sent the Sheriff to the tailor's and ordered the rest of the wardrobe by phone, including several yards of white stuff to make turbans.

Judge Harriman escorted Abe upstairs to a guest room.

"I have a royal house guest this week," the Judge announced to the help. Since the Judge's servants were all Negroes and didn't vote, the Judge used his normal private-life voice. "My guest wants to keep his presence a secret and so do not discuss him with anyone. . .he is one of your people, but of noble ancestry, of course."

The maid who served the dinner was the first to see Abe, and she rushed the news back to the others who were waiting in the kitchen.

"Did'cha see the Prince? the handyman said.

"Is I a Princess? the maid answered.

"Hell, no, ya ain't, the cook said.

"Well I is a Princess, if he is a Prince," the maid said, laughing. "It

ain't nothing but a beat-up colored man, with some kinda towel thing wrapped around his head."

"Well, what he doing in there, honey?" the other maid said. "The Judge ain't none too fond of colored folks, as far as I heard tell..."

"What he's doing...is sitting right across from the Judge eating as big as you please, and the Judge ain't batting an eyelash."

"Lordy, Lordy, that's what I call a bold nigger," the handyman said. "Well, more power to him."

All the servants agreed and burst out laughing.

By the next day every Brother and Sister in town had heard the news about the Prince staying up at Judge Harriman's, and everyone was cracking up.

"Lordy, Lordy," they laughed, "if everyone didn't know me in this here count y, I'd buy myself a towel."

All the colored folks went around with a big smile at the joke.

"Sheriff, don't the niggers seem extra happy these days to you?" the deputy asked, looking out the jailhouse window.

These here common old ordinary American niggers that we got around here is always happy. The y is like chil-lun...come on, play cards. I raise ya seven cents."

After a week of being Judge Harriman's house guest, in the middle of the night and wearing his new wardrobe, Prince Abe was put on the train to Chicago. And for ten years after Prince Abe, no Black man with any common sense ever traveled through the South without carrying a white towel.

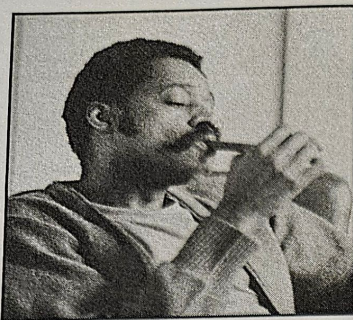


Photo by Bob Bryan

miss the whole thing. It's a story that can be read on a lot of levels. It's sort of like Voltaire or Swift and I know that ain't told you shit, but there's a good way around that: buy the book!

Bob: Are these people, Voltaire and Swift, the people that you...

Melvin: Naw... it's simply the framework, the way the work is framed. It's sort of like *Candide* or *Cullivers Travels*, it's an odyssey. In a way, it could be like Mark Twain.

Bob: Is it autobiographical?

Melvin: Oh, I assume that everything that you write is autobiographical, in that it comes from the quirks of your mind. But the cat starts off at about 1900, the turn of the century: a brother gets put in jail on a humble. He is going to be released the next day, but on another humble he gets sentenced to 3 months on a chain gang. Before that 3 months is up, the nigga that he's shackled to tries to make a break, takes him along and they get caught, and he gets 5 years. Before the 5 years is up he's stacking sand on a levy; he falls over in the water, so he gets life for trying to escape. Before he gets to serve out his life sentence—he's still a very young man—he's killed in an avalanche where he was working in a quarry. We're up to about page 5 now, can you dig it (group laughter), and these stones, which are pressed so heavy upon this cat's chest; he takes a breath, and he says, "Jesus Christ", and he's dead. And a voice says, "Yes" and here's this liberal-looking white man sitting behind this desk, floating on this cloud with a pointed beard. "Well, since you know my name"—it's god who's in charge of the admittance into Heaven or Hell, and they ain't got no open admissions (laughs) in heaven. So my man goes to hell. But the devil, trying out a new system, has formed a pit where he doesn't put nothing but Americans, and in this pit niggas get 3 times more rapid advancement. They only have chitterlings and hog maws and so forth and... now the white people there are as

miserable as a mutha; niggas say. "Man, god-dog!" (laugh)

Bob: "This is hell?"

Melvin: Yeah, one of the cats says, "This is hell, man?" They get to ball all the paddy chicks they want to. So the devil defends this; he says, "Look, with such little effort... I don't have to use box cars. I don't have to hardly use any torture equipment anymore. I have to use less imps to keep patrolling... 'CAUSE I'm using psychological torture." Since the white folks outnumber them 10 to 1, ok, so we got 1/10 that is relatively contented, but these others are so miserable. In fact that's the most successful pit in Hell, the one he's running now, his new experimental modern pit. This is the Hell this cat comes to, and you can go to school in hell. So he goes to school and learns to read and write, 'cause the devil figures that the more you know, the more it hurts. So that's the way it goes.

Bob: Psychological warfare...

Melvin: Well, not warfare, but psychological torture.

Bob: Psychological torture, in our lives now... especially when I look at the front pages of these newspapers, I'm constantly seeing these kinds of images projected out at us. Even if you don't read it, you've seen these messages, and the ideas start off my day.

Melvin: Hey, exactly; that's exactly right.

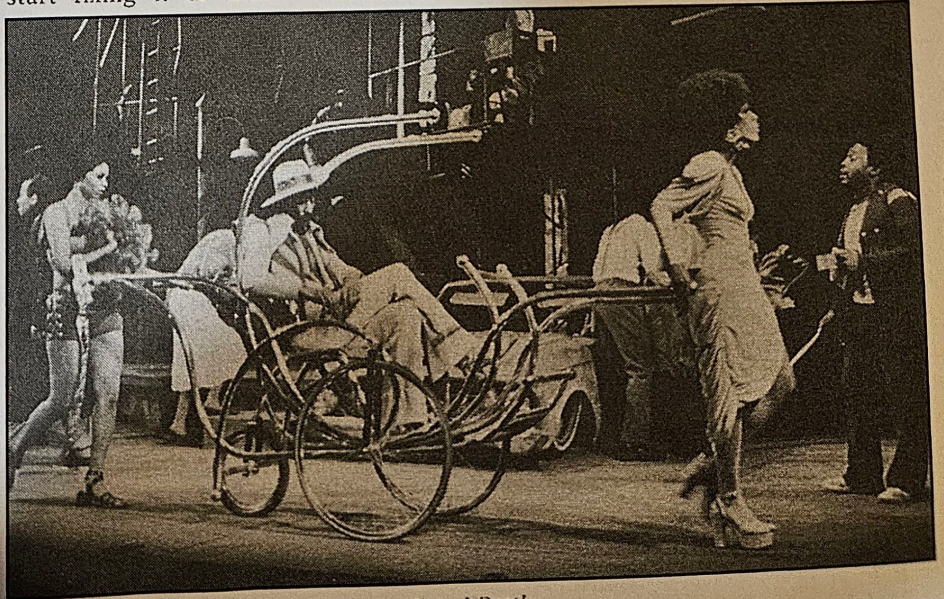
Bob: How do we begin to offset the psychological torture and listen to ourselves?

Melvin: Just like we're discussing this book here; you're laughing, or you say, "Hey, man, you know, I see a correlation between this and that." That's the beginning of it all. If we can start fixing it so that we can start

making those correlations, so that we start understanding, that's where it's at. That's what the book is for and the fellow traces, in his search for freedom, the Black political trends that we've followed for years. The first thing he does is, he educate himself very vigorously, so that he can show the white people that black people can really be educated, he bought the hype that white folks laid on him that yall can't be educated; because if you could we'd open our arms to you; which was the first original Black movement, and that takes us back to Booker T. "We'll form Tuskegee, and then after we've shown that we can be bricklayers and blah blah blah, then they'll take us in." Bullshit!! 'Cause soon as you get that together, they start gerrymandering the place. So then he goes on to the next step, then he goes through communism, then he goes through these various steps, and meantime you're laughing. It's a funny story, and a whole lot of stuff is going on.

Cal: When attempting to put a social-political ideology into artistic terms, how can this be done without becoming didactic?

Melvin: I don't know (laugh) I would sit down and work out the problem. I think in each case I've tried to express a new forms and I've been fairly successful... that may take 3 years to say. I don't know! The answer would be what the final product would be. It'd be what I thought when I was faced with the thought of seeing all these mirrored Black people who were mute and never had a voice. I decided that I wanted to give them a voice; I wrote *Ain't Supposed to Die*. That was the entering thesis, to have the wino talk; I wanted to have the hooker talk. I wanted to have the black cop talk. So I gave



Scene from *Ain't Suppose To Die A Natural Death*.

Cont'd from page 21 *Black Picture Show*

ALEXANDER

(To NORMAN)

Are you still here? Is J.D. gone?

NORMAN

Yes.

ALEXANDER

Will he be back?

NORMAN

For dinner ... of course.

ALEXANDER

Why are you still here?

NORMAN

I'm leaving in a moment.

ALEXANDER

Hand me that mirror.

(NORMAN passes ALEX a hand mirror)

I done wore this Motherfucker out.

(HE takes a pill)

Norman ... I'm frightened without you here.

(MUSIC soft coming up. Begin whole MUSIC interlude)

Why are you pretending?

(HE looks at NORMAN, pausing to search his face)

Something's wrong. What is it?

NORMAN

(Quietly, so as not to be overheard)

I've stayed to warn you, Sir.

ALEXANDER

Of what?

(MUSIC)

NORMAN

You are in mortal danger.

J.D.

(Talking to RITA. Confidential so as not to be overheard)

It was reported in the press today ... that a geologist has discovered in the area of the Asian Sea in the depth of the sand, a pulse. It's reported its tentacles are attached to nothing but the earth itself. They're suspicious as hell about the whole thing. The only logical explanation is that they have discovered the center of life.

(Pause)

... It is dead still. Nature is dead still. You're to be terminated.

(J.D. and RITA watch ALEX and NORMAN)

NORMAN

I have to leave, Sir.

(NORMAN smiles again. HE starts to move quickly from the room)

ALEXANDER

Norman will you tell me what you're talking about!

(NORMAN can be seen grabbing his coat and a small duffle bag and running towards the front door.)

MUSIC interlude continues.

MUSIC out)

NORMAN! ... NORMAN! ... NORMAN! ...

(A door can be heard to slam.)

RITA runs into the downstairs room. A dressing gown on. J.D. sits in a corner downstairs looking at them. Listening like a frightened child.

MUSIC interlude stop)

RITA

What's the matter?

ALEXANDER

Who are these people you have coming tonight?

RITA

Good God, why are you so upset?

ALEXANDER

WHO ARE THEY?

RITA

He produces very important movies and he's rich as hell!

ALEXANDER

WHAT'S THEIR NAMES!

RITA

Philippe ... Philippe DeValois and his wife Jane. Put your jacket on, they'll be here any minute now. Did that son of a bitch leave here without setting out the mixes for the cocktails?

ALEXANDER

You pusillanimous faggot!

RITA

NOW LISTEN HERE! ...

ALEXANDER

Don't you check people out before you accept them!

RITA

THEY'VE GOT MONEY!

ALEXANDER

I'M AN ARTIST ... AND YOU PASSED A DEATH SENTENCE ON ME!

RITA

MELVIN VAN PEEBLES

each one of these people a voice. I didn't arrive at an equation; you don't put the sum, you take the parts and then you add 'em up. That's where the artistry comes, in the doing, that keeps it from being didactic. I could have given a long lecture and stood up on the stage and said, "You must understand we are not a monolith, we are many people", with that point of view. That would have been nice, and it may have been very correct, but it's much hipper to have one guy saying, "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, preach and praise God, blessings unto the race! Preach and praise God, can you help me to get a little taste." That's one guy; the clerk's saying, "Dee dee dee dee dee, how many drunks in the hall and how come day breaks and don't fall and night falls and don't break and blue eyes ain't satisfied unless his foot's up me." That's a whole 'nother voice, a whole 'nother voice. Or to the disillusioned bar maid: "Love, love, love, yeah, you better believe it." These are different voices. It's better to demonstrate these voices and demonstrate, on top of these voices, the hands on the green ribbons flowing down from the top, who's controlling all of that. That was my solution to that particular problem that I had posed to myself. Just as another project was a different solution to that problem.

Cal: O.K. When you did *Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death* you had notes for it, but the actual creation of the play...

Melvin: No, no, no, whoaa, slow down. You mean did I have notes for it?

Cal: Yeah, did you have notes for it?

Melvin: There you go, that's better. I had the whole thing written in my mind. I mean I knew what order I wanted it in, I knew where I wanted it to go, and the music was written, this, that and the other. It was there.

Cal: How much did the actors and the...

Melvin: They say what the fuck I tell them to say. I'm not limiting myself to the denominator of their vision; that would have been an overall vision.

Gilbert Moses, who directed it. I told him that this is what I wanted done, and how I wanted it done, and he brought his things to it, and that's it. There's a musical structure; I mean, these things were already written.

Bob: So in terms of your technique, do you have a particular kind of technique in terms of your approach to, say, a novel? Do you think it out first, or do you write an outline and then you adhere to the outline?

Melvin: It varies according to each thing. I write one novel one way and I write another novel another.

Bob: How did you write *The True American*?

Melvin: I sat down and I put down 241 pages, and I started to type.

Cal: And filled up the sheets?...

Melvin: Uh huh, yeah, and wondered what was going to happen the next day.

Bob: Wait a minute, you had 200 and something sheets and...

Melvin: I asked the cat, I said, "How many pages do you want the book to be?" and he said, "About 241 pages," and I took 241 pages and started at one end and stopped at the other.

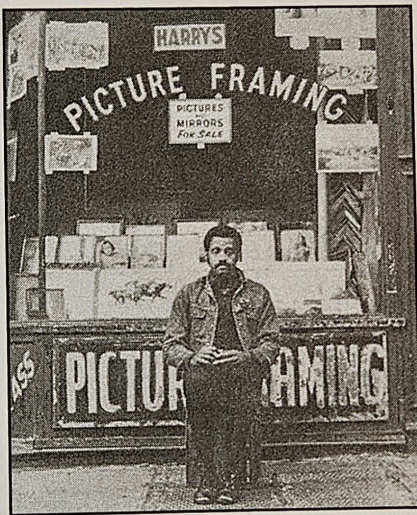
Bob: Did you know how it was going to end?

Melvin: No idea.

Bob: You mean as you were going through you just...

Cal: Were you somehow pacing yourself for 241 pages?

Melvin: That's how long the man said they were buyin', so that's how long I wrote it.



Cal: How do you think it would have turned out if... say, for example, if the guy said 300 pages, do you think that it would be different?

Melvin: Probably.

Bob: Do you think that that technique is unusual for a writer?

Melvin: I don't know. I never asked. I never asked nobody. How do I know if it's unusual or not? He said 3rd person, 241 pages... that's a round length, so I wrote it.

Bob: Did you have a title, did he say... did he just want a book from you?

Melvin: Nope. Well, he wanted a Black book, so then the cat got very busy of course. The cat didn't take the book because the book was too hip and they wanted a book about suffering, Black suffering and so forth, and I had gone to ape city on it. I said, OK, and it became a parody of all those things. I said I was going to write 5 pages a day. Then I spent years rewriting it and

honing it. That's how I did that.

Bob: What was the very first idea that you came out with? The very first thing that you put on paper?

Melvin: The first line.

Bob: Which was...

Melvin: I don't know. You want me to look it up?

Bob: Everything sort of just weaves from there.

Melvin: Everything just came from the first line; the second line came just like ABCD. I didn't know what was going to happen the next day. I'd say, "I wonder what's going to happen the next day." I'd wonder what's going to happen tomorrow. It has that quality, that head-on rush.

Cal: When you're writing a novel as opposed to writing a play, or a film-script; do you have to put yourself into a kind of head that this is going to be a novel, or it is it all the same head?

Melvin: It's pretty much the same head, and then after it's done I usually find out what it is. So the head, the whole ambience is the same. I'm writing a couple of songs now, and they're bubbling around, bubbling, bling bubbling, bling, if I was pushed to it, I guess I could put them on paper today. But I'll put them on paper later on.

Bob: What technique do you use, since you don't know music... of putting it down?

Melvin: I numbered all the keys on the piano. I just number them 1-88 and I play 7, 31, 6, 6½; the black keys are the ½ notes.

Bob: And you just give that to an arranger, composer?

Melvin: And I go blink, blink, blink and the cat says, "Oh, you wrote that in so forth and such and such. And that is so forth and such and such." And I say, "Oh, yeah, (laugh) very interesting." But, when I started off, the musicians that I knew at the time, who didn't have any bread at the time; they were too vacuous, man. You say, "Hey, man we going to rehearse at 2, are you gonna help us out?" "Yeah, man..." Well, 2 or 3 weeks later, "Well, man, what happened to you?" "Oh, ahh, Jim, my old lady and I got tied up, we had a fight, man and..." I got tired of that shit, so I say, well, I'll just do it myself.

Bob: Well, the last question that I have is, if you had to say who Melvin Van Peebles is, who would you say he is?

Melvin: Ahhhh, no idea, man. I never... I guess a pussyhound.

Bob: Can we quote that?

Melvin: Naw, better not (laugh). I'm just fuckin' with ya (laugh). No, man, you better not say that. I'm low-profilin' it these days! *